CHAPTER FOUR

The empire of Ghana

Soninke and Berber traders

Our three main sources of knowledge about the ancient Sudan — archaeology, oral history, and the books written by Africans or Arabs — tell us a good deal about the famous empire of Ghana.

We can be sure of some of the things they tell us; other things must be left in doubt. What we can be sure of is that early West Africans who lived to the north of the upper waters of the Niger River formed themselves into a strong trading state. This state spread its power over many neighbouring peoples; in other words, the state became an empire. It commanded a large region of trade, security and strong government. It lasted for several hundred years. It was deeply respected by travellers who came within its borders, and by others, living far beyond Ghana's borders, who heard of it or read about it.

We can be fairly sure, too, that the peoples who formed this state and empire were Soninke who spoke one of the languages of the Mande group; languages that are spoken today by many of the peoples of the westerly regions of the Western Sudan. These founders of Ghana had good trading relations with the Berber chiefs and traders who lived to the north of them, in oasis towns in the Sahara; and it was through them that they conducted their trade across the desert.

Growth of Ghana

The Soninke certainly built their state before AD 773, the date of the first North African reference to it. But exactly how long before we do not know. It is possible that they were traders in this region in very distant times. A tradition recorded in the *Tarikh as-Sudan*, an important history book that was written in Timbuktu about AD 1650, says that there were twenty-two kings of Ghana before the beginning of the Muslim Era (AD 622) and twenty-two kings after that. If this were true, it could place the origins of the Ghana kingdom in about AD 300.

By 800, in any case, Ghana had become a powerful trading state. Called Wagadu by its rulers, the name of Ghana came into general use because of one of the king's titles, *ghana* or war chief. 1 Each succeeding king was known by his own name, and also by the title of *ghana*. Another of his titles was *kaya maghan*. This means 'lord of the gold', because the king controlled the export of that precious metal.

Nothing is known about the political methods or history of Ghana under its early kings. What probably happened was that heads of large families or descent-lines 2 among the Soninke, encouraged by the needs and opportunities of the trade in gold and other goods with Berber

1 There are two reasons why the modern state of Ghana, though situated far away from Ancient Ghana, has the same name. One reason is that the old traditions speak of a movement of some of the people of Ancient Ghana southward into the region of Asante. Another reason is that the modern leaders of Ghana wished to celebrate the independence of their country — formerly called the Gold Coast — by linking their new freedom to the glorious traditions of the past.

2 This term will be used often in these pages. A descent-line or lineage means just what it says: a line of family descent, through fathers or through mothers, which links one generation to another, and goes on for several or for many generations. This means that all the successive members of a descent-line look back to the same 'founding ancestors'. Nearly always, they revered these ancestors as persons of great authority and power in the world of the spirits.
merchants of the Sahara, saw an advantage in having a single ruler. So they elected a king from among themselves. This king’s duty was to organise the trade and keep good relations with the Saharan traders, as well as acting as senior religious leader and as representative on earth of the ‘founding ancestors’ of the Soninke people.

In this way the king gathered power. He controlled the trade within Soninke territory. He made gifts and gave rewards to all who served him.

Next came an expansion of Soninke power over neighbouring peoples who were also busy with trade: the wider the territory the Soninke could control, the more prosperous they would be. By 800, the king of Ghana was able to make lesser kings or chiefs obey his laws and pay him taxes. And so the king’s wealth increased. With more wealth, he also had more power. He could command the services of many descent-lines. He could raise big armies. He could employ large numbers of messengers and other servants. He could pay for the needs of a growing empire.

Some account of how this was done for the later kings of Ghana is given in books written by North African and Spanish Arab authors during the eleventh and twelfth centuries AD.

One of these books offers a brilliantly clear picture of the court of the emperor of Ghana in about AD 1065, and of the way in which that emperor, whose name was Tunka Manin, organised his power and wealth. This book was the work of a Spanish Arab called Al-Bakri. He finished it in 1067.

The achievement of Ghana

From this account of Al-Bakri’s we can know a little more about what had happened during earlier times. It appears that many of the North African and Berber traders of the Saharan accepted Islam after the Arab conquest of the eighth century. They abandoned their old religions and became Muslims. They were made welcome at the capital of the emperor of Ghana. He was not a Muslim; he believed in Ghana’s own religion, but he allowed the Muslims to build a town of their own.

The ‘town of the Muslim traders’ was ten kilometres away from the emperor’s own town with its surrounding settlements. While the latter were built in the traditional materials of West Africa — hardened clay, thatch, and wooden beams — the most successful Muslim traders preferred to build their houses in stone, according to their own customs in North Africa. It is not known exactly where the capital was when Al-Bakri wrote his book. In the course of Ghana’s long history, the king’s capital was undoubtedly moved from one place to another. But we can add a good deal to Al-Bakri’s picture by studying the remains of Ghana’s last capital, which lay at Kumbi Saleh about 320 kilometres north of modern Bamako. Here too there was a town where the king of Ghana lived, and another nearby town where the Muslim traders had their houses and stables. At the height of its prosperity, before AD 1240, this city of Kumbi was evidently the biggest West African city of its day, and had as many as 15,000 inhabitants or even more.

So long as they obeyed the laws of Ghana and paid their taxes, the traders from the north were sure of safety and hospitality. This was a partnership in long-distance trade that went on for a very long time. Its safety depended on the strength of the emperor and his government. Al-Bakri has left us a description of all that. King Tunka Manin, he wrote, ‘is the master of a large empire and of a formidable power’. So powerful was this king, that he could put out ‘200,000 warriors in the field, more than 40,000 of them being armed with bow and arrow’. But the real strength of the Ghana armies, as we know from other North African sources, came from their power in iron-pointed spears. Their weapons, like their government, were stronger than those of their neighbouring peoples; and it was this strength which helped to build their empire.

1 Al-Bakri did not visit Ghana himself, but collected information from North African travellers who did.
Working from eyewitness accounts which he had received from Muslim travellers, Al-Bakri described the pomp and majesty of King Tunka Manin:

When the king gives audience to his people, to listen to their complaints and to set them to rights, he sits in a pavilion around which stand ten pages holding shields and gold-mounted swords. On his right hand are the sons of the princes of his empire, splendidly clad and with gold plaited in their hair.

The governor of the city is seated on the ground in front of the king, and all around him are his counsellors in the same position. The gate of the chamber is guarded by dogs of an excellent breed. These dogs never leave their place of duty. They wear collars of gold and silver, ornamented with metals.

The beginning of a royal meeting is announced by the beating of a kind of drum they call deba. This drum is made of a long piece of hollowed wood. The people gather when they hear its sound...

The memory of these old glories were long remembered among the peoples of the Western Sudan. Five hundred years later, for example, a writer of Timbuktu called Mahmud Kati entertained his readers with the stories of those ancient days. In his valuable history book, the Tarikh al-Fattush, he tells how a certain king of Ghana of the seventh century, called Kanissa’ai, possessed one thousand horses, and how each of these horses 'slept only on a carpet, with a silken rope for halter', and had three personal attendants, and was looked after as though it were itself a king.

These old stories, magnified and embroidered with the passing of the years, also tell how the kings of Ghana used to give great banquets to their subjects, feeding ten thousand people at a time, and dispensing gifts and justice to all who came. Such stories give an idea of the greatness of Ghana's reputation in the years of its power.

Government of the empire

If we look carefully behind the travellers' information collected and written down by Al-Bakri and other Arab writers, and behind the stories that were afterwards told in countless homes for many years, we can trace several developments in ways of life. These were of great importance to West Africa. They must be clearly understood.

With the growth of Ghana, and of other states like Ghana, the peoples of West Africa were inventing new methods of living together, of producing wealth. These ways needed a single strong authority or government which could rule over many lesser authorities or governments. This central authority or government could only, in the thought and customs of the times, be a king.1

In states like Ancient Ghana, the power of government increased still further. Important kings became kings over lesser kings. They became what are called emperors. At the heart of the explanation of why this happened there was the growth, as we have seen, of international trade. Occupying the lands to the north of the upper waters of the Niger, the old Ghana rulers and their people enjoyed a position of great power and value. Their towns and trading settlements became the go-between of middlemen between the Berber and Arab traders of the north and the gold and ivory producers of the south.

It was this middleman position which made Ghana strong and prosperous. It was this that gave its rulers gold and glory. It was this that paid for its armies, and made its civilisation shine with a light whose dazzling brilliance we can still glimpse in the writings of Al-Bakri. Little by little, the people of Ghana and their rulers felt the need for a strong government not only over themselves, but also over their neighbours, so that they could ensure peace and order throughout a wide region of the Western Sudan. For only in this way could they make the best use of their middleman position. And at the same time as they felt this need, they also had the chance of realising it. They were skilled workers in iron. They were able to use iron weapons against neighbours who generally did not have any.

As time passed, the ruling men of Ghana, the Soninke people of the Mande group, further extended their political power. They strengthened their middleman position by bringing lesser states like Takur (in modern Senegal) under their control. They pushed their borders southeastward in the direction of the land of the gold producers, and they also pushed their influence northward into the Sahara. They took control of south-Saharan cities like Audoghast, a famous market which, as we noted before, has long since disappeared. In this way the emperors of Ghana wielded power and commanded wealth. They were among the greatest men of their time.

Their system of government expanded with their success in trade. As it expanded, it became more complicated. A king and his counsellors

1 Today, of course, a central government can be many things besides a king. In fact, kings have almost disappeared from the modern world. They have disappeared because the stage of social organisation, which required kings in the old days, requires them no longer. People have invented more modern ways of government.
could rule over a small country. They could not rule over a large one unless they could also rule through lesser kings and counsellors. Even with the swift horses of the Western Sudan, a king's orders would have gone too slowly through the land, and would not have been obeyed. So the king of Ghana needed governors whom he could place in charge of distant provinces.

In this way there grew up a number of lesser governments, under lesser kings or governors. These gave loyalty and paid taxes to a single central government. Compared with what we have today, all this was a simple and crude sort of government. Ordinary folk ran many dangers. They were often bullied or plundered. But the growth and conduct of trade over a wide region meant peace and security over this region; and many people of Ghana benefited from this. The formation of Ghana and its growth into a large empire therefore marked an important stage in social development. It was a big political and economic achievement.

**Revenue and wealth of Ghana**

Before leaving this subject we must look a little more closely at how the emperors ruled, maintained their public services, and met the expenses of keeping law and order. For they established ways of government which appeared again and again, afterwards, in the Sudan.

Where did King Tunka Manin and the emperors who ruled before him find the wealth to pay many soldiers, and to feed and arm them? Where did they get the means to make rich gifts to strangers from other lands? Questions like these take us back to the economic system of the Ghana empire. And it is Al-Bakri, once again, who gives the answers. He explains how the rulers of Ghana used their control of the long-distance trade.

The ruler of Ghana, Al-Bakri tells us, had two main sources of revenue, of wealth with which to pay for government. These were taxes of two kinds. The first of these was what we should today call an import and export tax. This tax consisted of sums of money (or more probably their equal in goods) which traders had to pay for the right to bring goods into Ghana, or to take other goods out of the empire. 'The king of Ghana', wrote Al-Bakri, 'places a tax of one dinar of gold on each donkey-load of salt that comes into his country'. But he also 'places a tax of two dinars of gold on each load of salt that goes out'. Similar taxes, higher or lower in value as the case might be, were applied to loads of copper and other goods.¹

The second kind of tax was what we should call a production tax. It was applied to gold, the most valuable of all the products of the country. 'All pieces of gold that are found in the empire,' says Al-Bakri on this point, 'belong to the emperor'. But this regulation was more than a means of collecting royal wealth. It was also a way of keeping up the price of gold. For if the emperor had not insisted on taking possession of all pieces of gold, Al-Bakri explains, then 'gold would become so abundant as practically to lose its value'.

Ancient Ghana, in short, adopted the monopoly system that is employed to this day for another precious commodity, diamonds. Most of the diamonds of the world are mined by a handful of big companies. These companies work hand-in-hand with each other. They have agreed among themselves not to put all the diamonds they mine on the market. If they did, they would drive down the price, for diamonds would then cease to be scarce; and what is not scarce is not expensive. Instead, the diamond companies sell their diamonds in small quantities, according to the demand for them, so their price stays high. The old emperors of Ghana did much the same with their pieces or nuggets of gold.

They were able to do this because of Ghana's strong trading position. West African gold was important to Europe as well as to North Africa and the Near East. In earlier times the Europeans had obtained the gold they needed, whether for money, ornaments, or the display of personal wealth, from mines in Europe or in western Asia. These mines were becoming worked out at about the time of the rise of Ghana. Where else could Europeans and North Africans obtain gold? Only, as history shows, from West Africa.

And so it came about that the gold used in North Africa and Europe was largely supplied, century after century, by the producers of West Africa. Even kings in distant England had to buy West African gold before they could order their craftsmen to make coins in this precious metal. It was on this steady demand for gold that the states and empires of the Western Sudan founded their prosperity.

Ghana began the trade in gold. As time went by, other peoples began to copy Ghana's success. When Ghana disappeared in the thirteenth century AD, its place was eventually taken by another great empire built on the same foundations and by much the same methods. This new

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¹ Revenue' means the money or other kinds of wealth that governments get from taxes. The dinar was a gold coin of North Africa.
The fall of Ghana: the Almoravids

But a long period of confusion came between the fall of Ghana and the triumph of Mali. After about 1050, Ghana began to be invaded by Berber warriors from the north-west, from the Mauretanian Sahara. These Berbers were driven by troubles of their own, mainly poverty, into striving for a share in the wealth of more prosperous neighbours. Soon after AD 1000 they began to look for a new means of livelihood.

The solution they found, as so often in history, took a religious form. There arose among them a devout and very strict Muslim leader called Abdullah ibn Yasin. He established a centre of religious teaching, called a hermitage. He and those who followed him became known as the people of the hermitage, Al-Murabbin, or the Almoravids. Gradually, ibn Yasin brought the Berber communities of the far western lands under his influence. At the same time his missionaries set about the task of converting the rulers of those states in far western Africa whom they could reach, especially in Takrur (or Futa Toro), and in this they had some success. In 1056, moving northwards into Morocco, the Almoravids captured the great city of Sijilmasa, the main northern trading centre for West African gold. From there they went further to the north, conquering the rest of Morocco. Then they crossed the Straits of Gibraltar, and took over Al-Andalus, or Muslim Spain.

A southern section of the Almoravid movement meanwhile moved against Ghana. Its leader, Abu Bakr, put himself at the head of a Berber confederation, made an alliance with the people of Takrur, whom we shall discuss in a moment, and waged a long war against Ghana. In 1054 he took the city of Audoghast. In 1076, after many battles, the Almoravids seized the capital of the empire.

But these invaders, like others after them, could not hold the West African lands they had taken. There was much resistance. There were many revolts. Abu Bakr was killed while attempting to suppress one of these in 1087. By this time, however, the Ghana empire had fallen apart. Its last kings had authority over only a few of its former provinces, and we know almost nothing about them. Great changes were on the way.

The successor states of Ghana

In this time of confusion, set in motion by the Almoravid Berbers but soon bringing other peoples into action, the Ghana empire broke up, and some smaller states tried to build small empires of their own. One was the state of Takrur. Another was Diara. A third was Kaniaga. In some of these, a new name now enters on the scene, that of the Peul (or Pullo, or Pullo in the singular) whom in English we call Fulani (or Fulah in the singular).

These Fulani were to make several big contributions to West African history. The biggest of these will be described later on. Meanwhile we should note that the Fulani were and are a West African people of a somewhat different physical stock from most of their neighbours, but who spoke (and speak) a language related to the languages of Senegal.

They seem to have originated in the lands that lie near the upper waters of the Niger and Senegal Rivers, and to have shared these lands with peoples like the Soninke who played a leading part in the formation of Ghana. They appear to have begun as cattle-keeping farmers, which is what many of them remain to this day.

When Ghana suffered the blows of Abu Bakr and his armies, the Fulani of Takrur (in the northern part of modern Senegal) became independent. They in turn set out upon the road of conquest. After about AD 1200 they took control of the kingdom of Diara, once a
province of Ghana. Their most successful leader, whose name was Sumanguru, seized Kumbi Saleh, then the capital of Ghana, in about 1203. Meanwhile other Fulani and allied peoples became powerful in another old Ghana province, the kingdom of Kaniaga.

But this new attempt at building an empire out of the ruins of Ghana met with no better fortune than the Berber efforts led by Abu Bakr. Two developments brought Sumanguru's enterprise to defeat. The first was that the Muslim traders of Kumbi Saleh, Ghana's last capital, rejected Sumanguru's overlordship. For reasons that were no doubt partly religious and partly commercial, they left Kumbi Saleh and travelled northward, to form a new trading centre at Walata, far beyond the reach of Sumanguru's soldiers. Secondly, in about 1240 or maybe a few years earlier, Sumanguru was challenged by the Mandinka people of the little state of Kangaba, near the headwaters of the River Niger. The two armies fought each other at a famous battle. Sumanguru was defeated and killed. His chiefs and generals retreated to Takrur, where they and their successors continued to rule for many years.

Sumanguru's defeat opened a new chapter in history. For the little state of Kangaba was the heart and core of the future empire of Mali. It was to be the Mandinka people who would now bring peace and order to wide regions of the Western Sudan.

1 See map on page 35.
CHAPTER FIVE
The empire of Mali

Kangaba

The old traditions of the Western Sudan suggest that Kangaba, the little state that was to grow into the mighty empire of Mali, was founded some time before AD 1000. What is certain is that the Mandinka people of Kangaba were also middlemen in the gold trade during the later period of Ancient Ghana. They were important among those who carried to the north the gold of Wangara, the gold-bearing country that is now the northern part of the Republic of Guinea, to the market centres of Ghana. Probably it was through these gold-traders of Kangaba that the rulers of Ghana and their agents were able to secure their main supplies of gold.

In later times the traders of Mali, the Dyula or Wangara as they are still called, were to become famous for their skill and enterprise. There is reason to think that they were similarly active in the days of Ancient Ghana as well. It is likely that while Kangaba was a subject country of the Ghana empire, perhaps sending yearly gifts to its ruler in exchange for friendly protection against enemies and rivals, the traders of Kangaba enjoyed positions of privilege within the empire.

There was a two-sided interest here. The government of Ghana needed gold, and it was largely from Wangara that Ghana's gold must come. But the traders who dealt in the gold of Wangara also needed a market, and it was only in Ghana that they could find this market.1

When the empire of Ghana was split into pieces by attacks from without and revolts from within, this peaceful system of two-way interest was destroyed. All was then in the melting-pot for new rivalries for power. Eventually, as we have seen, Sumanguru prevailed. Once

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1 See map on page 42.

Sumanguru had mastered Kumbi and the main caravan routes, it was with him and his agents that the Mandinka of Kangaba had to conduct their business.

Yet Sumanguru, as we have also noted, was never able to set up a firm and lasting system of law and order over the lands he had conquered. Others challenged his power. The caravan routes ceased to be safe and peaceful. And no doubt the people of Kangaba, whose livelihood was thus threatened and who were increasingly oppressed by Sumanguru, were troubled by all this. In about 1240, at any rate, they decided to enter the struggle themselves. They made a bid for their own independence, and they won.

Growth of Mali

The legends tell the story in more colourful and personal terms. They speak of Sumanguru's harsh taxation, of his bad government, of his seizure of Mandinka women. These abuses caused the Mandinka to revolt. Fearing reprisals by Sumanguru, who had a frightening reputation for dangerous witchcraft, the ruler of Kangaba fled. But the situation was saved for him by a brother whom he had exiled. This
brother was Sundiata Keita. Returning from exile with an army, Sundiata gathered friends and allies, increased his forces, gave them fresh heart and courage, and marched boldly against the dreaded Sumanguru.

‘As Sundiata advanced with his army to meet Sumanguru’, say the old legends,

he learned that Sumanguru was also coming against him with an army prepared for battle. They met in a place called Kirina [not far from the modern Kankan]. When Sundiata turned his eyes on the army of Sumanguru, he believed they were a cloud and he said: ‘What is this cloud on the eastern side?’ They told him it was the army of Sumanguru. As for Sundiata, when he saw the army of Sundiata, he exclaimed: ‘What is that mountain of stone?’ For he thought it was a mountain. And they told him: ‘It is the army of Sundiata, which lies to the west of us.’

Then the two columns came together and fought a terrible battle. In the thick of the fight, Sundiata uttered a great shout in the face of the warriors of Sumanguru, and at once these ran to get behind Sumanguru. The latter, in his turn, uttered a great shout in the face of the warriors of Sundiata, all of whom fled to get behind Sundiata. Usually, when Sumanguru shouted, eight heads would rise above his own head.

But Sumanguru’s witchcraft, the legends say, proved less powerful than the witchcraft of Sundiata. Sumanguru was struck with an arrow bearing the spur of a white cock, fatal to his power, and ‘Sumanguru vanished and was seen no more…’ After this victory, Sundiata became the master of a new empire, governing through powerful and able men who were the heads of leading Mandinka descent-lines, each with a province under his control.

The capital of Kangaba at this time was at a place called Niani, a city that has long since disappeared but was located near the River Niger, not far from the frontier of Modern Guinea and modern Mali. And from about this time the name ‘Mali’, which meant ‘where the king resides’, absorbed the name Kangaba, and the empire of Mali was born.

The rulers of Mali

Sundiata was the founder of the empire of Mali, but not the first of Mali’s kings. This was Barmandana, who is said to have ruled in about 1050. He became a Muslim, and made the pilgrimage to Mecca that all Muslims are supposed to make at least once in their lives. He was followed by other kings of whom we know nothing but their names.

Sundiata, sometimes called Mari-Diata, came to the throne in about 1245. He ruled for about 25 years, doing great deeds.

Next came his son Uli, who also took the royal title of mansa (lord in the Mandinka language), and followed in the conquering path of his more famous father. He ruled from about 1260 to about 1277. Like other Mali kings, he made the pilgrimage.

Then came two of Uli’s brothers, Wati and Khalifa, but we do not know the dates of their reigns. They were said to be weak kings who ruled badly. Khalifa’s subjects revolted against him, and killed him. Power then passed to Abu Bakr who ruled until 1298.

In 1298 the throne was seized by a freed ‘slave of the court’. This was Sakuru who proved one of Mali’s strongest rulers. He held power till 1308. After him came Mansa Qu and Mansa Muhammad.

In 1312 another great ruler came to power, Mansa Kankan Musa. He ruled till 1337, and was followed by Mansa Magha, who ruled for about four years, and then by Mansa Suleyman, who ruled with much success till about 1360. Then came another Mari-Diata who ruled for about thirteen years, and was followed by other kings of less importance. By about 1400 the great period of the Mali empire was drawing to a close.

The achievement of Mali

Mali repeated the achievement of Ancient Ghana on a still greater scale. Its rulers secured or regained control of the gold-producing lands of Wangara and Bambuk. They invaded most of Diara to the north-west. They pushed their power down the Niger River to the shores of Lake Deba. They formed one of the largest of the world’s empires of those times.

Three periods of success occurred:
1. Under Sundiata (about 1235-60). He founded the empire.
2. Under Mansa Sakuru (about 1298-1308). He extended the empire.
3. Under his powerful government,’ wrote the great North African historian, ibn Khaldun, in about 1400, ‘the power of Mali became mighty. All the nations of the Sudan stood in awe of Mali, and the merchants of North Africa travelled to his country.’

1. The year of Musa’s death is often given as 1332. But Ibn Khaldun (born Tunis 1332; died Cairo 1406) whose writings are our best source of information on the dates of the rulers of Mali, has recorded that Musa was still alive in 1337.
3 Under *Mansa Kankan Musa* (about 1312-37). He again extended the empire. His success was maintained by *Mansa Suleyman* (about 1340-60).

**Mansa Kankan Musa**

When *Mansa Musa* came to power, Mali already had firm control of the trade routes to the southern lands of gold and the northern lands of salt. Now Musa brought the lands of the Middle Niger under Mali’s rule. He enclosed the cities of Timbuktu and Gao within his empire. He imposed his rule on southern trading towns such as Walata. He pushed his armies northward as far as the important salt-producing place called Taghaza, on the northern side of the great desert. He sent them eastward beyond Gao to the borders of Hausaland. He sent them westward into Takrur.

So it came about that Musa enclosed a large part of the Western Sudan within a single system of law and order. He did this so successfully that Ibn Batuta, travelling through Mali about twelve years after Musa’s death, found ‘complete and general safety in the land’. This was a big political success, and made *Mansa Musa* into one of the greatest statesmen in the history of Africa.

The Dyula (Wangara) traders were greatly helped by all this. Their trading companies began to travel in many parts of West Africa.

These Dyula traders were men of skill and energy. But they also drew strength from being Muslims. Belonging to Islam gave them unity. They stuck together even when members of their trading companies came from different clans or territories.

Islam was now important in the western Sudan (see page 136: *Islam and West Africa*).

Like the Mali kings before him, Musa was a Muslim. But most of his people were not Muslims. So he supported the religion of the Mandinka people as well as Islam. Different religious customs and ceremonies were allowed at his court.

Musa’s pilgrimage to Mecca became famous. He began it in 1324. His magnificent journey through the Egyptian capital of Cairo was long remembered with admiration and surprise throughout Egypt and Arabia, for Musa took with him so much gold, and gave away so many golden gifts, that ‘the people of Cairo earned very big sums’ thanks to his visit. So generous was Musa with his gifts, indeed, that he upset the value of goods on the Cairo market. Gold became more plentiful and therefore worth less, and so prices rose.

The North African Scholar, Al-Omari, who lived in Cairo a few years after *Mansa Musa’s* visit and wrote the words we have just quoted, declared that of all the Muslim rulers of West Africa Musa was ‘the most powerful, the richest, the most fortunate, the most feared by his enemies and the most able to do good to those around him’. Behind these words of praise we can glimpse the power and reputation that Mali drew from its control of a very wide region of trade in precious goods such as gold, salt, ivory and kola nuts.

Mali was now a world power, and recognised as such. Under *Mansa Musa*, Mali ambassadors were established in Morocco, Egypt, and elsewhere. Mali’s capital was visited by North African and Egyptian scholars. On returning from pilgrimage, Musa brought back with him a
number of learned men from Egypt. These settled in Mali and Timbuktu. One of them, called As-Saheli, designed new mosques at Gao and Timbuktu, and built a palace for the emperor. The fashion of building houses in brick now began to be popular among wealthy people in the cities of the Western Sudan.

Niani, the capital of all this empire, has long since disappeared. Yet as late as the sixteenth century, the Moroccan traveller Leo Africanus (Hassan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan az-Zayyati) could still describe it as a place of ‘six thousand hearths’, and its inhabitants as ‘the most civilised, intelligent and respected’ of all the peoples of the Western Sudan.

The spread of Islam also called for new methods of rule. Mansa Musa opened courts of law for Muslims, alongside the old courts of law for those who were not Muslims.

The government of Mali

Like Ghana before it, Mali was ruled by kings who were the heads of important descent-lines or leading families. (See note on page 35). The kings ruled the different parts of the empire, called provinces, through governors; these governors were also the heads of local descent-lines. As well as these persons of important families, who were persons of privilege because of their birth, the king had some officials who did not come from important families. Some of these came from families who ‘belonged’ to the king because they had lost their civic rights, usually through being captured in wars. Later on, as we shall see, such ‘slave officials’, or ‘king’s men’, were to get more power.

In the capital, at Niani, there were various top officials. Most of these were noblemen: that is, they came from important families. One was the hari-farma, in charge of the fishing on the Niger. Another was the sao-farma, responsible for looking after the forests of the empire. A third was the habiti-farma, the king’s ‘minister of agriculture’, just as the khalissi-farma was the ‘minister of finance’.

This was a more complicated kind of government than Ancient Ghana’s. That was because populations had grown in size; trade was bigger than before; society had become more complicated.

Rivals and successors

But the very success of this far-reaching empire was also a reason for its decline. The spread of metal-working and of trade, the growth of the ideas of kingship and of strong central government, the pressures of wealth and trading rivalry — all these and similar influences stirred many peoples in West Africa. Some of these peoples saw that there were new advantages in being free to run their own affairs. The ruler and people of the city of Gao, for example, had to pay taxes to the emperor of Mali. Now they became determined to be rid of these taxes. They believed they could do better on their own. Others thought as they did.

The truth was that Mali had outgrown its political and military strength. Only supremely skilful leadership at the centre could hold this wide empire together. Mansa Musa commanded that skill. His successors, generally, did not. For a while, all remained well with the empire, especially under the rule of Mansa Suleyman (about 1340-60). Then the good days were over. Mansa Mari Diata II, who followed Suleyman, was described by Ibn Khaldun as ‘a bad ruler who oppressed the people, depleted the treasury, and nearly pulled down the structure of the government’. He was followed by several other rulers who did little better than he had done.

Mali remained a powerful empire until about 1400. Then it ran into a host of troubles. Gao rebelled. The Tuareg nomads of the southern Sahara, always hoping to win control of the market cities of the Western Sudan, seized Walata and even Timbuktu. The peoples of Takrur and its neighbouring lands, notably the Wolof, threw off their subjection to Mali. Others in the south-western region of the empire, especially the Mossi in what is now the modern Republic of Upper Volta, began to harass the emperor’s governors and garrisons.

Yet the grand old system, now more than two hundred years old if we reckon its life from the time of Sundiata Keita, still enjoyed widespread respect. Many peoples had grown accustomed to thinking of the Mali mansa, the Mali key, as their rightful overlord. The habit of thinking this was slow to die. And so it came about that the fame and reputation of this once wide system of imperial rule lived on for a long while after it had become weak and defenceless.

Even in the time of the powerful Songhay emperor, Askia Muhammad (1493-1528), the traditional frontier of Songhay and Mali was still recognised as running through the region of Sibiridugu — astride of the upper Niger, that is, in the neighbourhood of the river-city of Segu. And Niani, the capital of the old empire, was still a large and prosperous city. Commercially, too, the traders of Mali, the famous Dyula companies, were the most enterprising and successful merchants of all the western and central regions of West Africa. They travelled far and wide, across the plains and through the forests, trading even on the distant coast of central Guinea.
But the political power was mostly gone. As early as 1400 the Songhay ruler of Gao is said to have pillaged Niani itself. In 1431 the Tuareg rushed into Timbuktu. By the end of the century Mali had no power to the east of Segu. Even within his homeland, the Mali emperor could seldom do more than stand aside and let things happen. Yet he certainly tried. In 1534 he sent an ambassador to the coast for help from the Portuguese, with whom he and his predecessors had enjoyed good diplomatic and trading relations. But the king of Portugal was unable to help, and did nothing except send messengers and gifts to his ally Mansa Muhammad II. The time was still far ahead when Europeans would be strong enough to have any direct influence on the affairs of West Africa.